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Add job-hunting to shopping list at supermarket



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CAREER STRATEGIES

Get ready, Texans. You'll soon be able to scan job openings at the supermarket.

State and federal jobs, that is. And only at certain supermarkets for a while.

State officials on Monday launched a pilot project they're dubbing InfoTexas, which will place 50 public access kiosks at selected locations around the state. The Texas Employment Commission has contracted with North Communications, based in Santa

Monica, Calif., to provide the technology for the easy-to-use kiosks, which feature touch screens, video, audio text and graphics to deliver information from TEC.

Michael North, North Communications' founder and CEO, said he sees his company's information kiosks as the

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automated teller machines of government services.

In English or Spanish, Texans will be able to search the Governor's Job Bank — a list of about 500 available jobs in state agencies. They'll also have access to federal government job listings, an estimated 700 to 800 at any one time.

By touching the TV-like screen on the kiosk, they'll also be able to find out what government-funded jobs training is available in their area, how to get unemployment benefits and how to file a claim with TEC for unpaid wages.

Mr. North and TEC officials envision having job seekers able to apply directly for private-sector jobs listed with TEC, at as many as 350 kiosks around the state. The technology also can be used for state services such as buying a hunting or fishing license or paying for motor vehicle registration with a credit or debit card. (California is currently doing the latter.)

Monday night, North Communications was connecting and testing a kiosk at Fiesta Mart's store on Jefferson Avenue in Oak Cliff. Two other Dallas pilot sites are at Danal's Supermarket on 10544 Harry Hines Blvd. and Saver's Cost Plus at 4800 Columbia and expected to be active by the end of the day Wednesday.

The TEC pilot is one of a number of changes bringing information technology to bear on the employment market. Increasingly, companies are using optical scanner technology and software to read and store resumes. Private resume databases are spreading.

Bill Grossenbacher, administrator for the TEC in Austin, said the state's employment agency has more automation in the works. State agencies are testing a system that will allow employers to place job orders directly in TEC's computer, saving time and labor.

And TEC also is looking at a screening system like those in use by private industry that will be able to generate a "top 15" candidates list from its database for interested employers.

Meanwhile, the state will evaluate the InfoTexas kiosks after six months to decide whether they want to continue and expand the service.

"We hope it works two ways," Mr. Grossenbacher said. "We want to reach a lot more people. And we hope that by shifting information out to the kiosks, we can free up our

people to do more one-on-one counseling and job development work."

TEC estimates that it uses the equivalent of 40 or 50 full-time positions statewide just to answer fairly routine and general questions, he said.

Labor economist Audrey Freedman warned that automating job listings is only a start to the knotty problem of linking people with jobs. One of the biggest challenges for state employment agencies is to assess and train job seekers to be what the customer — business — wants and needs.

"The biggest problem isn't having some kind of list, even if that list is up to date," she said.

As the Texas pilot goes forward, Mr. North's firm will be talking to other government agencies about services that can be put on the system. The technology investment is all Mr. North's, which will bill the state for each transaction, a fee that can range from \$1.50 upward to \$10 for a range of fairly complex functions that might include printing.

In California, one of the seven states where Mr. North has placed information kiosks, residents can use the kiosks to order and pay for a copy of their birth certificate, re-register their car or find out the nearest recycling center. A computer programmer looking for work can enter his or her skills in the system and get a printout telling how many jobs are listed at the nearest state employment office.

"We're trying to do a single face to government," said Russ Bohart, director of California's Health and Welfare Data Center. Cities are developing applications that will allow people to register their kids for summer playground activities or apply for a simple building permit, he said.

"People gravitate to this (technology)," Mr. North said. "They like it. It's colorful. It talks to you."

Even the disconnected kiosk at Fiesta Mart on Tuesday seemed to indicate Mr. North could be right. The blank screen that invited customers to touch was loaded with fingerprints.

Career Strategies appears weekly. If there is a career issue you would like to see addressed in this column, write Diana Kunde at The Dallas Morning News, Communications Center, P.O. Box 655237, Dallas, Texas 75265 or fax to 214-977-8776.

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Associated Press

Michael North, president of North Communications (center), shows Gov. Ann Richards how InfoTexas, the new Texas Employment Commission electronic job bank, works.